

MEMA: THE COMMONWEALTH'S FRONT LINE FOR HURRICANE PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

By Governor Jane M. Swift



As the summer draws to a close, we may follow, with great interest and anticipation, the path of a tropical storm or hurricane as it accelerates northward along the Atlantic Coast toward New England. As Governor, I am comforted to know that the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) has been tracking this storm for well over a week, from its birth off the coast of Africa, as it races across the Southern Atlantic toward the Caribbean. If the storm does indeed head our way, the State Emergency Operation Center, located at MEMA Headquarters in Framingham, will spring to action as members of the Massachusetts Emergency Management Team (MEMT) arrive for the anticipated "long haul."

During a storm event, MEMA's Communications Center, a daily 24-7 operation, is in continual contact with my office, MEMA's four Regional Offices, key local officials, state agencies, and threatened coastal and inland communities. Volunteer amateur radio operators also ensure that their 14,000 member statewide network is set to help out. Together with this information and the constant updates directly from the National Weather Service in Taunton, we plan our response to the emergency at hand.

Dealing with a hurricane does not begin here, however. MEMA is the state agency responsible for coordinating the Commonwealth's storm preparation and response. The members of the MEMT are liaisons of scores of federal, state, local, private, and volunteer agencies and organizations that meet, train, and exercise together on a monthly basis for just such an

occasion. The MEMT is the "911" for local communities when an event presents problems that exceed city or town capabilities. The impressive array of agency representatives at hand means that someone in the State Emergency Operations Center has the ability to quickly solve a community's problem, by providing additional equipment, personnel, or technical expertise.

Preparedness is an important spoke on the wheel of emergency management. MEMA's Regional Offices, as well as the agency's Planning and Training Divisions, work very closely with all 351 local municipalities to develop and exercise their own unique Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan to ensure each community has a viable, planned response in place. Plans are also developed on the state level as well. The 25-mile backup of 1996 Labor Day traffic, attempting to exit Cape Cod in anticipation of the near-miss Hurricane Eduard, was the catalyst for the development of the Cape Cod Emergency Traffic Plan. MEMA, along with the National Guard, the State Police, the Coast Guard, the Red Cross, the Army Corps of Engineers, and local officials crafted a plan to more efficiently get traffic over the Cape's two bridges, including a housing strategy to get motorists off the highway if high winds forced the closing of the bridges.

During the early summer months, MEMA, in conjunction with the National Weather Service, conducts local hurricane workshops, where citizens and officials alike can discuss the proper steps for preparation. The MEMT has a two-day hurricane workshop and tabletop exercise in coordination with "Massachusetts Hurricane Preparedness Week," which I will declare this year during the week of July 21-27.

Once a storm has passed and its damage has been done, MEMA's Disaster Recovery Division goes into action, assisting in the evaluation of the destruction caused by the high winds, torrential rains, flash floods, storm surge, and coastal erosion. (See *Kudos to the Storm Team* on page 4 for information on the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs role in these assessments.)

Local communities may be looking for assistance to deal with the costs associated with the cleanup and damage to infrastructure, from seawalls to municipal buildings to roads and bridges. MEMA works with the federal government and the state legislature to secure funds for the cleanup. In the past decade, through MEMA's efforts, local communities have received almost \$42 million in hurricane-related assistance, the greatest being over \$32 million to 11 counties from Hurricane Bob in 1991. While much of the focus during a hurricane is on the coast, inland communities suffer as well, particularly from flooding. In fact, in 1999, Tropical Storm Floyd produced flooding in Central and Western Massachusetts that required over \$2 million of state assistance to make the necessary repairs.

With MEMA leading the Commonwealth's team to deal with the destruction nature can deliver, the citizens of Massachusetts can feel confident that the proper steps have been taken to ensure their safety and security. It is important that you do your part as well by listening to advisories from MEMA and your local officials, particularly evacuation notices, so we can minimize loss to life and property in the face of these terrible storms.



GOVERNOR JANE M. SWIFT AND SECRETARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS BOB DURAND AT THE OPENING OF THE DEER ISLAND PUBLIC ACCESS TRAIL, MAY, 2002.